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AUTHOR Doran, Matt; Smith, Allyson; Edwards, Mike; Hamilton, Jared; Morse, Laura; Hoppel, Andrea; Chambliss, Catherine

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ABSTRACT

The development of the Internet offers a new means of obtaining several types of psychological assistance. Various web sites have been created for the purpose of providing information about psychological problems and offering support to those with a wide spectrum of behavioral health problems. Unfortunately, the quality of these sites is not regulated and therefore varies widely. Preferred sites pertaining to bipolar disorder, autism, and depression were extracted from a sample of 210 sites related to these problems. This paper presents a study in which six undergraduate psychology majors examined these sites. All sites had been rated among six dimensions of quality, including accuracy, practicality, normalization, sense of belonging, referral, and feedback mechanisms. A list of addresses for the top three sites (as evaluated by the students) for each topic is included along with descriptions of the top sites. (MKA)

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Preferred Psychological Internet
Resources for Addressing Bipolar Disorder,
Autism, and Depression

Matt Doran, Allyson Smith, Mike Edwards,
Jared Hamilton, Laura Morse, Andrea Hoppel,
Catherine Chambliss

Ursinus College

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Introduction

The development of the Internet offers a new means of obtaining several types of psychological assistance. Various web sites have been created for the purpose of providing information about psychological problems and offering support to those with a wide spectrum of behavioral health problems.

Unfortunately, the quality of these sites is not regulated and therefore varies widely. Preferred sites pertaining to bipolar disorder, autism, and depression were extracted from a sample of 210 sites related to these problems. All sites had been rated along six dimensions of quality, including accuracy, practicality, normalization, sense of belonging, referral and feedback mechanisms.

Method

A total of 210 web sites were evaluated. Each addressed one of three problems: bipolar disorder, autism and depression. The sites were chosen randomly from various common search engines on the Internet. Six trained undergraduate psychology majors from a small liberal arts college on the East Coast completed the evaluations. After reviewing the appropriate clinical literature for each of the problem areas being addressed, the raters accessed sites in order to assess their potential as a psychological resource for those in need. Each rater evaluated roughly 25-40 sites, which pertained to the one of the three categories in which the student had become most expert. After ratings were completed, raters reviewed all their choices and selected the most preferred sites for inclusion in this listing.

Preferred Sites Organized by Topic

Top three sites for bipolar disorder

<http://www.frii.com/~parrot/bip.html>

<http://www.harbor-of-refuge.org/>

<http://www.wantree.com.au/~fractal/>

The first site, www.frii.com/~parrot/bip.html, was an excellent site run by someone with the disorder. This fact alone does much to add to a person's view that they are not alone in the world. The site featured not only the clinical definitions of bipolar disorder, but also a sort of "translation" into layman's terms that were extremely easy to read and relate to. The site also did an extensive job covering diagnosis, symptoms, and treatments, with the latest news in each category. The main goals of this site are promoting a sense of belonging as well as providing useful information. The site contains many practical suggestions about dealing with the disorder that can only come with first hand experience. The ease of interface on this site is one of its greatest features. It is well written, easy to browse, and just generally inviting.

The second site, www.harbor-of-refuge.org/, had many of the same features as the previous site. Although the site is larger, it is still very easy to navigate through. The links section is extensive, with links broken down into very specific categories. The main feature of this site was the real time chat. This is one of the more unique features the Internet provides and this site did an excellent job

incorporating it. The chat function was easy to use and the room is occupied by one of more of the creators of the page. This immediate access to others with bipolar disorder is tremendously successful at combating the potentially deadly effect of loneliness and confusion. The availability of almost 24 hour real-time assistance from someone familiar with or suffering from the disorder is a key component to the site. Along with an extensive FAQ section, the treatment and diagnosis section round out the site, making it among the best on the Internet.

The third and final site, www.wantree.com.au/~fractal/, is an Australian site dedicated to bipolar disorder. The site is extremely inviting and easily navigated. Aside from thorough treatment, diagnosis, and links sections this site also has email and real-time support. The site is continuously being updated with the latest news in the fight against bipolar disorder. An interesting feature at this site was the treatment concern section, which is an extensive review of the adverse effects of various bipolar treatments. The availability of up to date treatment information is an essential step in helping people with bipolar disorder be fully aware of all treatments and their drawbacks. This unique site, tailored especially for sufferers of bipolar disorder, contains articles and stories that apply directly to people with the disorder and those care about them.

Top three sites for autism

http://pages.prodigy.com/dporcari/recovery_zone.html

<http://www.autism-info.com>

<http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/curry/dept/cise/ose/categories/aut.html>

The site http://pages.prodigy.com/dporcari/recovery_zone.html received an outstanding rating in all 6 categories of the rater evaluation. The site is designed to help individuals learn more about "Applied Behavior Analysis" (ABA). The site provides general information on ABA as well as news from recent conferences, contacts to newsletters and workshops, success stories, how-to start a child in an ABA program and additional informative web links. The content is neatly organized and highly accessible as well. The purpose of this site is to guide parents or other inquirers in a step by step guide for providing autistic children with help and the financial and other subtleties that go along with this. This site provides a listing of school districts that provide some or all of finances for in-home ABA programs including: Insurance and tax issues as well as Legality issues including a list of attorneys that commonly deal with funding issues. Overall the site can help provide parents and care takers of autistic children well on their way.

The site <http://www.autism-info.com> is an excellent example of a user-friendly site for the general information seeker. The site was rated outstanding in 5 of the six categories. The site begins with a map of the United States that allows users to click on any of the fifty states. This connects the user to the state specific site, which provides local listings of organizations and methods of seeking help. Immediately below the map the national and international commercial sites are provided, accessible by a simple click of the users mouse. Additional link categories include medical research, behavior modification, giant reference, education, books, biographies and on-line chat groups. The page also offers the

inquirer a simple method of leaving a message for the sites' author. This page is an excellent reference for those seeking general information. It does not point the user in the direction of one specific method of treatment, but rather offers methods for seeking information on many different aspects of treating autism.

The site:

<http://curry.edschool.virginia.edu/curry/dept/cise/ose/categories/aut.html> was given a rating of outstanding in five of six evaluative dimensions. This site offers information on several alternatives in treatment for autistic individuals. Topics of this web site include an extensive explanation of autism from a variety of sources, listings of Autism Organizations and Support groups, a listing of general resource links on autism, and several approaches on treatment of autism and how to make contacts in reference to each.

Top three sites for depression

<http://www.walkers.org>

<http://members.aol.com/depress/index.htm>

<http://www.psycom.net/depress.central.html>

The site <http://www.walkers.org> possesses a number of qualities that places it among the best sites regarding depression. The site seems to be designed to promote a sense of belonging among affected individuals, but does far more. It allows the user access to a large quantity of information about depression that is well organized and easy to understand. It is a site that is both user-friendly and highly rated in comparison to similar sites.

The site <http://members.aol.com/depress/index.htm> is designed to help unaffected individuals understand depression. One of the site's strongest points is its extensive list of frequently asked questions and answers. Although it could have included more information on the treatment of depression, the site does an excellent job of explaining the disorder and providing avenues of attaining emotional support. These qualities make this site one of the best three sites for depression.

The site <http://www.psycom.net/depress.central.html> received the highest overall quality rating in the area of depression. This is largely because it contains an enormous amount of information on depression. The site provides facts, recent news, helpful tips for affected individuals, and access to on-line support. The site is also easy to use and undoubtedly is one of the best.

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Signature: 	Printed Name/Position/Title: Catherine Chambliss, Ph.D., Chair, Psychology	
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